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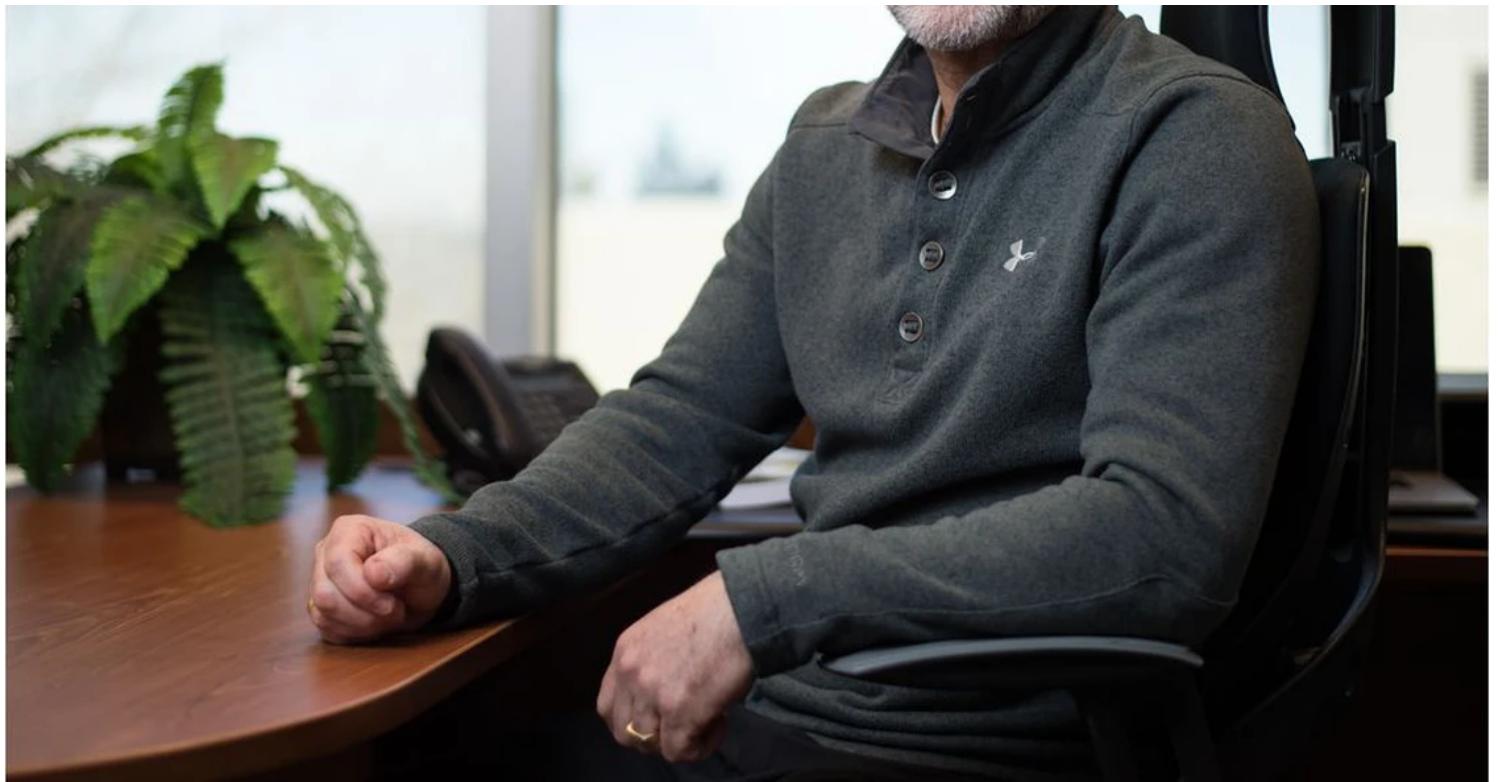
Some will need convincing to get COVID vaccine: psychologist

Clinical psychologist Gordon Asmundson says work will need to be done to convince as estimated 20 per cent to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

Heather Polischuk

Nov 06, 2020 • November 6, 2020 • 2 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)





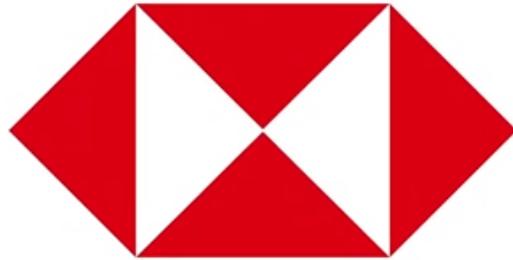
Gordon Asmundson, a psychology professor at the University of Regina, sits in his office at the university in Regina, Saskatchewan on Mar. 12, 2020. Asmundson has been researching the anxiety and fear around COVID-19. PHOTO BY BRANDON HARDER /Regina Leader-Post

Once a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, many Canadians will be ready and willing to get one.

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But not everyone. In fact, 20 per cent of Canadians — and perhaps even more — have suggested they won't be among those rolling up a sleeve.

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A study released last month, funded by the University of Regina and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, surveyed almost 3,700 Canadians and Americans in May, asking whether they intended to get a SARS-CoV2 vaccine once available. Twenty per cent of Canadians and 25 per cent of Americans said they did not.

U of R psychology professor and clinical psychologist Gordon Asmundson helped compile the study and said it's crucial not only to understand people's intentions and motivations, but also to address concerns so more people will agree to be vaccinated.

“From the psychologist’s perspective, we need to understand why people are hesitant,” he said. “And then we need to understand what it’s going to take to get them to change their mind and then we need to deliver that message in the most effective way.”

The problem, he said, is herd immunity is only possible if enough people are vaccinated. And he added the numbers his team compiled might already be on the low side, given an August study in the United States reportedly clocked 50 per cent with anti-vaccination attitudes.

“That surprises me,” he said.

Asmundson said those not wanting to get vaccinated largely fall into camps at opposite ends of the spectrum — on one side, those who are anti-vax, COVID deniers or minimizers and those who generally distrust experts; and, on the other, those who are fearful of an as-yet-unknown vaccine. Those in the first group might never be reachable, so the trick is to try to reach those in the second camp.

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The study asked those who didn’t want a vaccine to provide reasons. Tops on the list were worries about inadequate testing, potential negative side effects or concerns the vaccine wouldn’t work. Addressing those concerns in the right way, Asmundson said, is crucial to convincing more people to get a vaccine, thereby allowing herd immunity a chance to work.

The right approach isn’t likely to be urgings from government leaders, but rather education and awareness coming directly from experts in the health field — most often, here in Canada, our chief medical health officers.

“What that boils down to for public health campaigns, in order to increase the likelihood that people get vaccinated, those campaigns should include messages that the vaccine was rigorously tested, that it was developed following established procedures that were not rushed, and the message delivered by a recognizable and trusted health authority as opposed to a community leader or social media influencer,” he said. “I think that’s really what becomes important, because we will see messages about this, and the way those messages are constructed are going to either be influential or they’re going to be ignored.”

The study provided an example of what not to do, noting the U.S. termed its vaccine production program “Operation Warp Speed.” The writers of the study suggested “Operation Due Diligence” would likely go further to engage public trust.

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Regina getting drive-through COVID-19 testing centre

